

STATEMENT  
OF  
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY  
BEFORE  
THE  
HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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“Hurricane Harvey: Lessons Learned and the Path Forward”

Submitted

By

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## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee. My name is Tony Robinson, and I am the Regional Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Region 6. Region 6 is comprised of five states, Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. I'd like to thank you for holding this hearing in the Houston area and providing this opportunity to discuss the lessons learned from Hurricane Harvey and the path forward for FEMA and our state and local partners.

Many members of this committee, including Chairman McCaul and Congresswoman Jackson Lee, have districts that were severely impacted when Hurricane Harvey unleashed massive amounts of rain on the state of Texas last August.

Together, in close partnership with the state of Texas, ably led by Governor Abbott and his excellent team at the Texas Division of Emergency Management, known as TDEM – and their partnership with Mayors, County Judges, and local Emergency Managers – we have built strong response and recovery capabilities to serve Texans. FEMA's regional and national assets integrated into this structure to work across an impacted area of more than 37,000 square miles to assist in response and recovery operations.

When Hurricane Harvey hit Texas as a Category 4 hurricane, it caused a great deal of wind damage and record-breaking rainfall equivalent to approximately 33 trillion gallons in less than the span of a week. That flooding directly impacted millions of people from our nation's fourth largest city, Houston, as well as small and medium size communities along the coast and into the interior of the state.

Recovering from Hurricane Harvey will take a number of years, and FEMA is committed to being responsive to our state and local partners as they continue the recovery process. There is still much work left to do, but working in a continued partnership at all levels of government, including partners from the voluntary agencies and private sector, we will recover "Texas Strong."

## **Hurricane Harvey – Lessons Learned**

Because of Hurricane Harvey's size and scale, we learned a number of valuable lessons, not least of which was the resiliency and bravery of the people of Texas. The flooding caused by the unprecedented rainfall transformed many everyday Texans into heroes and first responders. Neighbors helping neighbors, whether in cities like Houston, or Corpus Christi, or in the suburbs of Montgomery and Jefferson counties, or small towns from Rockport to Nederland, saved the lives of untold numbers of Texans. At FEMA Region 6, we are constantly reminding those we serve that, "You are the help until help arrives," and Texans can be very proud of the way that they rose to the challenges created by Hurricane Harvey.

Texans weren't the only ones who answered the call. Volunteers from across the nation, in particular those from Louisiana, including the Cajun Navy, added their boats and supplies to the rescue efforts of so many volunteers in Texas. Through their actions and unrelenting efforts, Texans, and those volunteers who came in from across the nation, showed that "Texas Strong," was not just a slogan, but a fact. That strength was also visible in the people from the coastal

bend to the border with Louisiana, who were willing to risk their lives to help out friend and stranger alike in those crucial early hours of the disaster.

The state of Texas, and TDEM in particular, along with local governments and municipalities, should be commended for the work they did in saving lives as the storm struck and lingered over the state, creating immense challenges across such a wide swath of land. The state clearly takes emergency management very seriously and it has spent considerable resources preparing for dealing with natural and man-made disasters. Their sound preparations were highly effective, and they were organized in ways that enabled FEMA and others to be highly effective partners in the response and recovery efforts.

Another important lesson that we have taken away from the impact of Hurricane Harvey is the importance of pre-disaster preparation. When FEMA's Administrator Brock Long spoke to you last month about the agency's strategic plan, he mentioned that building a culture of preparedness and readying the nation for catastrophic disasters are two of our three main strategic goals. Hurricane Harvey is a prime example of what a difference being prepared can make.

One area where we have made progress in building a culture of preparedness is the strong relationship that was already in place between FEMA and TDEM. We worked so well together in this disaster because we have spent years developing a strong partnership. That was crucial as we supported the State of Texas in its response and rescue efforts. Because our leadership and staff already had strong working relationships, our ability to communicate and coordinate was greatly enhanced.

One area where we have not made nearly enough progress in building a culture of preparedness is in educating the public of the value of purchasing flood insurance. Too many people in Texas, and throughout the nation, do not understand the importance of carrying flood insurance, regardless of whether they are in a flood prone area or not. Ensuring the public knows the value of the protections provided by carrying flood insurance, which in most cases is a low cost protective measure, would help ensure those affected by flood are made as whole as possible. As seen with Hurricane Harvey, many of us learned very painful lesson about the need to have flood insurance. As people work on their own personal recoveries they are coming to the unfortunate realization that Stafford Act programs offered through FEMA are not a form of insurance and the grant dollars we have available are not sufficient to make them whole, nor in fact was that ever the purpose of FEMA's Individual Assistance programs.

As we work to better educate the public about what assistance is available after a disaster, we must do more to promote awareness of the National Flood Insurance Program and other options to purchase flood insurance. Our agency's goal is to double the number of flood insurance policies. Hurricane Harvey provides a powerful lesson about the importance of having flood insurance with the average payout being more than \$80,000, compared to an average Individual Assistance grant that was under \$7,000. Clearly, \$80,000 is going to get you a lot further along the path of recovery than \$7,000 will. That should help us drive home the importance of investing in a flood insurance policy.

Administrator Long also testified last month about his vision of disasters being “federally supported, state managed, and locally executed.” To that end, Hurricane Harvey also taught us that we need to do more to empower the states to handle the challenge of a disaster-created housing mission. Texas stepped up to the plate in response to Harvey and sought to have a multi-pronged approach to the housing mission, allowing local jurisdictions to pick from a number of different options including mobile housing units and other programs designed to allow people to return home and shelter there as they completed the needed repairs. This brings us to our agency’s third strategic goal: to reduce the complexity of FEMA programs. There is still much work left to be done, but the partnership we have with the General Land Office of the State of Texas provides an innovative approach to streamline how we address disaster housing. While the housing mission has not been without its challenges, the lessons learned at the local, state, and federal level will allow us to further reform and reduce the complexity of our housing missions in the future.

Another important lesson learned was the changing nature of communications during both the short-term response and long-term recovery phases of a disaster. The challenges and opportunities created by cellular technology, the internet, and social media provided FEMA, TDEM, and local emergency managers new ways to interact with the general public. The public has also grown more diverse leading to additional focus on languages beyond just English and Spanish, to be inclusive of those with different communication needs such as the deaf community. During the initial response phase, people used social media to provide the locations of people needing rescue, to report on conditions, and to facilitate the coordination of volunteer activities and resources. During the recovery phase, FEMA employed tools such as the FEMA mobile application and Facebook Live to provide real-time updates and disseminate important information. As we prepare for future disasters FEMA must be mindful of changing communities and methods of communication to be certain that accurate and timely information is distributed and useful information is received.

At FEMA, we are constantly reviewing our program delivery, decision-making processes, and responses to ensure that we improve, minimize errors, and better serve survivors on their worst day. We also are eager to work with Congress, and this Committee in its oversight capacity, to determine if legislative changes are required, and to ensure that we are executing our programs consistent with congressional intent. We have learned, and will continue to learn, from this historic disaster.

### **The Path Forward**

As we plan for the future and work on the long term recovery from Hurricane Harvey, we must also consider future threats. We are less than 60 days out from the start of the 2018 hurricane season and we have to be cognizant of very real threats that may be on the horizon.

In response to the historic nature of Hurricane Harvey, FEMA’s response will be larger and longer lasting than normal. We are opening a Long Term Recovery Office so that we can be an effective and responsive partner to state and local officials as they drive the recovery efforts. This office will hire additional staff and will remain open for the next few years to ensure that we can respond to the extraordinary needs generated by this disaster.

Additionally, FEMA will be working closely with our partners at all levels to increase the promotion of flood insurance so that individuals and businesses are better able to manage and fund their own recoveries from future disasters. Greater emphasis on the importance of flood insurance will be key to creating the culture of preparedness that is one of our agency's strategic goals.

We are working with our federal, state, and local partners to review and revise procedures to streamline and simplify the delivery of our programs, so that we can provide a process that is easier for the public, eliminates duplication of effort, and will allow for a more timely response to their concerns.

To help our local and state partners build communities that are more resilient we will work on making sure that mitigation funding and planning receives greater emphasis. As an area that is no stranger to natural disasters, we must do more to ensure that construction and development takes place in a way that is consistent with mitigating the impact of future hurricanes and other potential disasters.

We will also work with our stakeholders and partners on a communication strategy meant to empower individuals and communities to prepare for the disasters that are inevitable in our region. FEMA will continue to work to improve our programs, communication strategies, and to support our partners. But from response to recovery it is local communities and individual citizens who must lead the way. We will do all we can to empower them to do so.

### **Conclusion**

Hurricane Harvey caused significant damage to many jurisdictions throughout Texas. FEMA remains committed to working with our federal, state, and local partners to make the state more resilient and to support the recovery no matter how long it takes. Through our mutual efforts, we will benefit by having learned many valuable lessons that will allow us to build a culture of preparedness in Texas and throughout the nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions you may have.